DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 053 FL 013 219

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TITLE Learning To Develop a Topic.
INSTITUTION Stanford Univ., Calif. Dept. of Linguistics.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 9p.; In its: Papers and Reports on Child Language Development, Number 21, p63-70.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; Communicative Competence (Languages); *Connected Discourse; Infants; Interaction; *Language Acquisition; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

The emergence of the ability to maintain and develop a topic of conversation is examined. The production of a competently structured topic involves utterances that are both propositionally contingent on previous utterances and related to the global concern of the topic. Children under 2 years of age can only product utterances that are contingently relevant. Videotaped mother-child interactions involving five English children under the age of 2 were analyzed. It was demonstrated that routinized interaction provides lessons in culturally expected behavior and a frame within which children can exhibit an increasing amount of planned conversational contributions, until they reach the point where they no longer need the prompting of routines. The development of the ability to sustain a topic is defined in terms of three stages in which the child's discourse is progressively less controlled by adult forces and more by the child's own discourse capabilities. (RW)

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Papers and Reports on Child Language Development, No. 21 (1982)

Stanford Univ. Dept. of Linguistics

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Learning to Develop a Topic

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One of the main components of communicative competence (Hymes 1972) is, clearly, being able to initiate, maintain and develop, and close a topic of conversation. Taking as my working definition of discourse topic that found in Keenan and Schieffelin (1976): "a proposition (or set of propositions) expressing a concern (or set of concerns) the speaker is addressing" (p.343), I have been looking at the organization of propositional material in children's discourse in terms of how very young children learn to maintain their topics and elaborate on them.

Here I want to discuss, firstly, what it means to produce a competently structured topic, showing how it involves two kinds of relationships of relevancy--utterances must be propositionally contingent on previous utterances, but also speak to the global concern of the topic. Very young children (under about 2;0) cannot do the latter i.e. they can only produce utterances that are contingently relevant. Older children (and adults) also make their utterances relevant to some global proposition, which represents the topic as a whole. Secondly, I want to go on to illustrate the evolution of the ability to maintain a topic, showing how routinized interaction provides lessons in "culturally expected" interaction, and a frame within which children can exhibit an increasing amount of planning of conversational contributions as they develop, until they reach the point where they no longer need routines as a crutch, as it were, (though they may still appear in the data). I shall conclude by suggesting that the evolution of the ability to handle a topic can be seen in terms of three stages, spanning the developmental period, in which the child's discourse is progressively less controlled by adult forces and more by the child's own discourse capabilities.

The literature on children's abilities to organize their propositional material at the multi-utterance level reveals that there has, in fact, been little work focussed directly on this area of research. The most extensive published work is that represented in Keenan and Schieffelin's (1976) paper "Topic as a discourse notion" where they explored topic from both an adult and a developmental perspective. In that paper, they suggested, firstly, that there are a number of steps that a speaker must go through in establishing a discourse topic, something that I investigated in my dissertation (Foster 1979) using data that I shall be drawing on again today. There I showed how children evolve in their abilities to initiate topics from preverbal to verbal competence, and how the types of topics children initiate expands, as the means to express them develops (Foster 1981). In Keenan and Schieffelin's paper, they went on to suggest how the topical relationship between utterances could be characterized, in terms of collaborating and incorporating propositions from utterance to utterance across speakers as the topic progresses. In that discussion, they noted that children tend to make their topics very short because of factors such as limited attention span, being easily distractible, failing to understand that an adult's remark was relevant, and so on. While these

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are clearly features of children as conversational partners, it is not true that children are always incapable of long topics. Within routines they can produce really quite long sequences of utterances on the same topic; and, in fact, even outside of them I think children frequently produce topics longer than Keenan and Schieffelin imply. They may not be well-formed adult-like topics with the precise presuppositional links between utterances that adult topics have, but they do involve mother and child sharing the same general concern.

Other studies that bear on the question of discourse topic and its development include the work of Bloom and her colleagues (Bloom, Rocissano and Hood, 1976) in which they examined the development of contingency relations between child and adult utterances in children aged 19-36 months. They showed that, initially, contingency relations are basically contextual rather than linguistic, but that gradually children develop the means to use the adult's utterances to build upon and introduce new topical material. They also noted that children go through a stage where they imitate the adult's contribution, something that I also found in my data, and which I have argued elsewhere (Foster 1982) allows the child to do propositional cohesion in advance of understanding how it works. Lynne Bernstein (1981), in her work within a Hallidayan framework, looked at ellipsis as a cohesive mechanism, and its development in children, focussing on the fact that children can "do" cohesion without understanding how it works.[1] This kind of doing propositional cohesion without true linguistic competence is, I think, an important developmental mechanism (Foster 1981) and can be related, as Bernstein suggests, to Vygotsky's theory of the zone if proximal development.

Other research relevant to the development of topics, as we shall see, includes studies of routines (e.g. Watson-Gegeo and Boggs, 1977), Bruner's work on routines and shared attention (Bruner 1975) and Nelson's work on scripted interaction (Nelson 1981) which I shall refer to again below, and Strage's paper, in this volume, on the expression of contrast in utterances in discourse.

The data that I am using in this paper comes from video-taped mother-child interactions collected in England, of five middle-class children observed in their own homes, engaged in their normal daily activities. The children were taped at each end of a six-month period and at the first taping were between the ages of 0;1 and 1;11, roughly evenly spaced across the two-year age range. For each child at each age, a total of one hour's tape was collected (except the youngest child at 0;1, of whom only one-half-hour was collected.) The data was collected over a period of days in which I was able to ensure that both mother and child had time to become used to being taped. There is, then, nine-and-a-half hours of tape from ten different ages collected from five different children. In this paper I shall illustrate my points with data from children in their second year.

In looking at the topical structure of these interactions, the first thing that struck me was how mature even the interactions involving the youngest children seemed to be: the impression of coherent discourse seems to be created so skillfully by the adult that the child only needs to acquire a verbal representation system to be fully adult--the basic

structure seemed otherwise to be all there. Closer analysis revealed, of course, that this was not, in fact, the case.

One obvious way in which adult and child contributions to topics are discrepant is in the relative richness of the communication systems each has available, but this certainly does not affect the child's involvement in topics per se. As soon as they had evolved the means to express their communications successfully through gesture, eye-gaze, intonation and idiosyncratic words, i.e. by the beginning of the second year, they were actively initiating as many topics as their mothers, and were beginning to produce the simplest kinds of textual markers of contingency, such as repetition of a word in the mother's utterance (see above). They were not, however, developing topics in the way adults do.

Another way in which the very early topics differ from adult topics, even until quite far into the development of multi-word utterances, lies in the kind of relevancy relationships between utterances in the topics. As van Dijk (1980) has discussed in his work on the organization of discourse, the propositions within a discourse are related to each other in two ways--both utterance-by-utterance and hierarchically. That is, each utterance is usually relevant both to the preceding utterance and to the global concern of the topic--"global concern" being "discourse topic proposition" in Keenan and Schieffelin's terms; the "macroproposition" in van Dijk's.[2] What was clear from my data was that, initially, children do not have the capability of handling the vertical kind of relationship, only the horizontal utterance-by-utterance kind, as in the following from Kate at 1;10:

M. showing C. a little toy duck inside an egg
M. "what is it?"
C. /kæk/
M. "duck"

or the following, where the relevant reply to the adult's question is non-verbal: Nicholas at 1;4:

Mealtime.
M1. "d'you want a drink?" + offers cup to C.
C1. /ŋəʔŋ/ + extends his hand towards the cup, but does not grasp it
M2. "no?" + taps cup
3. "no?" + taps cup
4. "well pick it up then. yourself" + points at cup
C2. grasps cup and drinks
M5. "that's right"

Here, in the communicative behavior, we have only one (or maybe two) adjacency pairs: between M1 and C1 (and between M4 and C2). We do, though, see <u>action</u> plans at this age that show the child able to move through a sequence of steps and subgoals in the pursuit of some end, and therefore showing, on the non-linguistic plane evidence of hierarchical structure. Such action plans may well be the non-linguistic correlates or even the basis for the later emerging hierarchical topic structures, but I would be the first to urge caution in coming to such a conclusion (cf. Bates, 1979). The work of Miller, Galanter and Pribram (1960) is obviously relevant here.

Such hierarchical structures do not emerge in the child's <u>speech</u> until quite some time later. In the following data, we see an example

of such a hierarchy: Ross at 2;6

Mealtime. There are two decorative plates on the wall, one on either side of Ross.

C1. "des dat's flower" + points to one of the plates
M1. "dat's not a flower"
C2 "plate"
M2 "it's a plate with a pattern on
but it's not like a flower"
C3."it's a flower pattern"
M3."ooh dear" ((not attending to C's topic))
C4 "dis another plate dere" + points to the other plate
M4 "mm" ((not attending))
C5 "dook buvvers buvvers" (("brothers")) + points to both plates
M5 "what did you say?
what was that word?"

Here the child clearly produces utterances that are both related to the utterances they follow and to the overall topic of the section of interaction; and the child is clearly in control of the textual devices at his disposal, and can negotiate the evolution of the topic with his mother, such that the following kind of hierarchical structure is built up:

This is precisely the kind of structure that seems to be absent from the topic structures of younger children, though, as I have said, they seem to have non-linguistic hierarchical structures.[3]

Despite their inability to produce the kinds of relationships between propositions that Ross shows in the example above, younger children nonetheless give the impression that they are taking part in conversations that are coherent. Part of this is clearly to do with the mother's exploitation of situational factors. She will pick up and comment on, and incorporate into the talk, objects of interest in the environment, actions of the child, and so on, which helps to increase the cohesiveness of the child's simple communications which are themselves grounded in the here and now. For example, the child may only respond contingently to a request to blow on his food, or may point to his food with a notice marker or whatever, but the mother will incorporate these little snatches of communication on the part of the child in general talk about the meal. Much of the child's day is, in fact, made up of activities that have expected components, e.g., meals, bath-times, getting ready for nap-time, etc. In these situations, there is a kind of ritualization of the non-linguistic aspect of interaction which means that the adult and child can easily ground their linguistic interaction in joint concerns (as Bruner 1975 has suggested). Actually, there seems to be a range of ritualized or routinized interactions which predict, to a greater or lesser extent, the linguistic content.

The routines in which linguistic content is least constrained are

things like meals, playing with a posting box or a construction toy, where the general "questions of immediate concern" are predictable, but not the actual propositional contribution, nor their linguistic form. Then there are the more highly constrained routines such as the naming game, sorting colored blocks, "what does the horsie/cow/dog/etc. say", and so on, where the kind of propositional content is predictable in the sense that things in the environment will get talked about in the naming game, or that colors will be named as part of the block game, but we cannot predict in what order things will be named, or precisely how they will be expanded upon, or encoded in utterances. Finally, there are totally predictable routines (linguistically--propositionally and textually--and non-linguistically) as in nursery rhymes, "How tall are you? So high!", "Knock at the door" (to get a child to open his/her mouth) and so on. The question is: who controls the routines, and how are they involved in the development of topics in early childhood?

I have already suggested that mothers make use of the "routine" nature of social interaction with the child to introduce and develop topics relevant to the ongoing concerns of the non-linguistic interaction--eating a meal, and so on; but how does the child make use of routines? The answer seems to be that routines indeed provide a frame for the child, within which he/she can produce greater numbers of turns appropriately related to the same topic than would otherwise be possible. Analysis of the data reveals that, with one type of exception, all those topics which involve a substantially greater number of turns produced by the child are routines of one of the three kinds I discussed.[4] (The one exception is when the child takes many turns to establish the referent at the beginning of a topic, e.g., when he/she wants something she/he is unable to make explicit the first time around.) It is noticeable, too, that the reverse is not true--the use of routines does not always mean that the topic will be longer, it may be as short as a non-routine topic, i.e.the child can make use of the topic-prolonging capabilities of routines, but is not bound by them. The following are typical examples of non-routine topics; the first from Kate aged 1;3:

Mother and child are playing with a construction toy
C. /gæ/ + points to her right + gaze in that direction
M. "what do you see?"
C. /gæ gæ/ + gaze at M. + points again
M. "yes, it's an elephant isn't it there
_____ elephant"
C. /[illegible]/ + grasps box and manipulates it, gazing at it and M.
/[illegible]/
M. "box
a box"
C. offers box to M. + /[illegible] /

(the box topic continues for another couple of turns, then Kate again indicates the elephant, but then moves onto another toy.)

The next one comes from Nicholas aged 1;4

Nicholas's mother is dusting the piano
C. /[illegible]/
M. "gone, what's gone?"
C. /[illegible] / + moves towards the piano

M. "coming to help?
what are all these finger marks up here Nicholas? hm?
what're all these little finger marks up on top of the piano?
they wouldn't by any chance have anything to do with you would they hm?"
C./gɔhəˀ/ + points at the piano
M. "there's only one person in this household with tiny hands"
C. points at the piano
M. "yes you going /əəəəəəəə/"
C. /gɔg gɔg/
M. "yes it's locked
it's resting
it's having a rest
having a rest isn't it now
hm? having a rest
C. turns away to the window sill and dabbles his hands in a pool of water he finds there.

Notice that most of Nicholas's turns here involve getting the topic established. Once he has, it ends. Contrast this with the following where Kate makes use of a routine:

Mother and child are looking at a book
M. "that's a donkey isn't it?"
C. /æːhɔˀx/
M. "hee haw"
C. / æ /
M. "what's that one?" + points at book
C. /gæ /
M. "what does that one say?
what does he say?"
C. /bæː/
M. "oh pu he doesn't" + ((laugh))
C. ((laugh))
M. "oh you're a monkey aren't you" ((laugh))
C. ((laugh))
M. "he doesn't
what does it say that one?"
C. /guhuˀ /
M. ((laugh)) it d- ((laugh))
C. /u:::::::::::::/
cont. .....

While still obviously a routine, this example illustrates the beginning of the child's freeing herself from the structure--she is playing with the format, and soon she will be able to plan within the routine quite extensively. This seems to be what happens to routines: they don't disappear, they become progressively more actively controlled and manipulated by the child until it is hard to recognize them as routines at all. The naming game, for example, probably evolves into simply the ability to discuss visible objects, having apparently gone through a stage of being partially planned, as the following data suggests:

Ross at 2;6. Mother and child are sitting at the table having a meal. They are not sitting in their customary chairs.

C. "that's mummy's chair" + points to an empty chair

M. "yes I usually sit over there don't I
this is where daddy sits isn't it?"

C. Ross's chair over there" + points at the other empty chair

M. "that's right you usually sit over there"

Here we have what is, basically, a naming routine, but apparently fully exploited by the child for the purposes of discussing a particular aspect of the environment.

That routines should evolve in this way is not very surprising if, as I presume, routines are the culture's way of saying "this is how you do a conversation", since we would expect there to be a gradual fusing of the child's actively controlled topic skills and the early templates he/she was given. (Relevant here is Nelson's (1981) work on scripts.

To summarize: Children begin with non-verbal interaction within which they can produce utterances that are contingently related to previous utterances as when they cooperate in adjacency pairs. They cannot yet produce sequences of utterances that all speak to a common theme, except when they are given a routine frame within which to do it. Then they can produce longer sequences that cohere. Just as with ellipsis and repetition, they are, in a sense, performing ahead of their competence. This is stage I.

At Stage II, they become able to take liberties with the routine structure and show evidence of sequences of planned contributions. We might also characterize it by saying that the routines change from being more to being less linguistically constrained. It is at this stage that the beginnings of hierarchical topical structures, independently controlled, also emerges (a change that might well be related to the change from concatenated clauses to subordination that occurs later in linguistic development, in the sense that both involve a move from chains to hierarchies.)

Finally, in stage III, children no longer need routines, though they can still, in a way, be recognized in the more formulaic of speech events, such as discussing a picture or other activities that presumably formed the cultural bases from which adults draw in teaching their children routines in the first place.

This paper has been an attempt to begin a characterization of how the ability to maintain and develop a topic emerges. There are obviously still a lot of unanswered questions to do with the nature of relevancy in discourse topics, the specific ways in which topics can be developed, how children learn to shift and close topics appropriately, and so on. Such questions are part of my ongoing research in this area.

Footnotes

1. For example, answering questions with what would be, in adult terms, elliptical expressions: answering "George" when asked "who did they find?", for instance.
2. Side sequences are an exception to this rule, but the lack of utterance-by-utterance relevancy at such points is usually clearly marked.
3. Notice that I am talking here about the organization of propositions within a topic, not the relations of topics to each other. This latter may, or may not, be hierarchical (cf. Michaels and Cook-Gumperz, 1979)

4. Turns were counted in terms of propositions/ideas. This is, at this stage, only a fairly rough measure of number of contributions to a topic, but, nonetheless reveals clearly those topics which have hugely greater numbers of child contributions than others (of the order of 25, 38, 15, as compared with the more usual 5, 4 or 2). In the data presented in this paper, the turns are laid out each on a separate line.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following for an assortment of suggestions, advice, helpful criticism, donkey-work and sheer supportiveness: Judy Reilly, Sharon Sabsay, Elaine Andersen, Susan Merrill, Elinor Ochs and Rich Janda.